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SUBJECT: VFM BANG ON UPCOMING VISITS, HUMAN RIGHTS, SHIPS

REF: HANOI 816

1.SBU) Summary. In a meeting with the Ambassador, VFM Bang stated that a visit to the U.S. by Politburo member Phan Dien would be important to further progress in bilateral ties. He welcomed upcoming visits by A/S Kelly, A/S Craner, and ASD Rodman for additional dialogue. He claimed high level support for a further opening up of the Central Highlands, including by mission officers, and described plans to convene provincial officials to hear first-hand from central authorities about the GVN's commitment to religious freedom and greater openness. He urged direct talks with MOD about details of upcoming ship visits. End Summary.

12. (U) Ambassador, accompanied by DCM and Pol/C, briefed Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang on April 6 about recent consultations in Washington and upcoming events. Bang was joined by Americas Department Deputy Director Nguyen Ba Hung and staffer Nguyen Hoanh Nam.

Phan Dien

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13. (SBU) Ambassador noted overall support in Washington for a July visit by Politburo member Phan Dien, with details about exact timing, itinerary, and Washington appointments yet to be worked out. VFM Bang called this trip the "right idea" at this time, and promised that it would "contribute to relations." He suggested a July 5-15 timeframe. He urged Ambassador to go along if possible, and noted that Ambassador Chien had suggested that Bang also accompany. He confirmed that Phan Dien, while not the Prime Minister, should be treated as a "very high" level visitor.

14. (SBU) Ambassador suggested further discussions soon on ways in which Vietnam could improve the climate for such a visit, including progress on human rights, commercial deals, and an Article 98 agreement. Bang concurred with the desirability of such further talks, citing specifically US interest in the Article 98 agreement. He noted that, from the GVN perspective, the meetings with National Security Adviser Rice and Secretary Powell were the top priority, whereas meetings with members of Congress, who would likely be out of session, were less important. He stressed the need for both sides to share information about expected agenda items so that there are "no secrets, no surprises" during Phan Dien's discussions.

Other visitors

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15. (U) Ambassador informed VFM Bang that A/S Kelly would like to visit Hanoi following the ARF SOM May 11/12 in order to have the next round of political dialogue. Bang said that he was looking forward to the visit and would clear his calendar to welcome A/S Kelly personally. Ambassador noted that A/S Craner likely would also come in the second or third week of May, not for a formal Human Rights Dialogue, but for an exchange of views on human rights and religious freedom. Bang called for "serious talks" before Craner's visit in order to make this exchange "effective." Finally, Ambassador noted ASD Rodman's likely June 4/5 visit, and expected calls at MFA, MOD, the MFA's Institute for International Relations, and the MPS' new research institute. Bang indicated support for the visit.

16. (U) VFM Bang also noted the upcoming visit to the U.S. of National Assembly Vice Chairman Nguyen Phuc Thanh, and asked that the USG receive his delegation well. Ambassador noted that we had invited the delegation to the residence before departure to answer any questions and to get a firmer sense of its priorities and intentions.

Human rights and religion

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17. (SBU) Ambassador told Bang that he had discussed with Ambassador-at-large for Religious Freedom Hanford the possibility of designation of Vietnam as a "Country of Particular Concern" but that no decision had been reached yet. He added that he had met with Chairman Thi of the

Government Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) just before going to Washington and was seeking another meeting soon. Bang noted that he himself had recently met with Chairman Thi to discuss religious freedom issues. Bang said he had also met with Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and Vice Minister of Public Security Nguyen Van Huong to discuss the situation in the Central Highlands. They agreed that the situation was "good" and that Vietnam should have "nothing to hide." They agreed that the policy and reality is that Vietnam should be more "open" and let visitors travel to the Central Highlands more freely. He noted that he had agreed for poloffs to go to the Central Highlands soon. (Note: there will be a joint Embassy/ConGen reporting trip over the Easter holiday. End note) He added that the Ambassadors of Switzerland, Norway, New Zealand, and Canada would also soon travel to the Central Highlands.

¶18. (U) Ambassador noted credible new reports of additional church closures, arrests, and beatings in Kontum and elsewhere, indicating at the very least a "disconnect" at the provincial or district level about implementation of GVN policy. VFM Bang agreed that this was a problem, and said that there would soon be a meeting at which central GVN leaders would clarify policy to provincial leaders from the Central and Northwest Highlands and try to ensure that local officials did not violate the official policy of the GVN and CPV regarding freedom of religion. He expressed thanks for the "patience and considerate opinion" of the Ambassador and Embassy staff regarding human rights issues; although the Embassy was often critical, it was fair, he admitted. He stressed Vietnam's progress over the longer term, but cited a remaining problem with a "small group of people" who have yet to "work in cooperation." He promised that the GVN would attempt to "persuade" rather than jail them. (Note: Bang's reference was not clear, but presumably was about unrecognized evangelists and house church leaders, as well possibly at some of the Dega separatist leaders. End note)

Ship visits

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¶19. (U) Ambassador described his recent discussions with PACOM, and expressed appreciation that the GVN had "postponed" the April ship visit until the second half of the year, rather than "canceling" it. He urged additional talks at the working level to determine just how many visits per year would be possible (while encouraging the GVN to agree to two), their timing, desired sites, and other details. VFM Bang expressed MFA support for ship visits, but urged the Embassy to be in direct contact with MOD and MPS.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: We need to pin down as quickly as possible the details of the upcoming US visitors and decide upon our own priorities for discussion. On the political dialogue (for which the MFA as host will have the first crack at an agenda), we have encouraged that the focus be as much as possible on larger strategic issues -- China's role, Korean peninsula, South China Sea, etc. -- while leaving the human rights dimension for A/S Craner's more focused exchanges. VFM Bang is clearly eager for a successful Phan Dien visit, but also nervous lest it go wrong and put Phan Dien in an awkward or embarrassing position. Having seen Phan Dien in action responding to human rights issues, we are less worried about this than Bang, however, and predict that he will be able to hold his own on the whole range of issues in the bilateral relationship.

BURGHARDT